English Language Transition Project

At A Level we follow the **OCR Specification** and will study the following topics:

- Topical language issues such as gender, power and technology
- Spoken language
- Child language acquisition
- Language in the media
- Language change over time
- A vast array of language terminology

https://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/as-a-level-gce/english-language-h070-h470-from-2015/

At the end of the two years, you will take two exams (Component 1 and Component 2) with three questions in each. Each exam counts for 40% of your final grade. There is also an independent coursework portfolio (Component 3) which includes two tasks and counts for 20% of your final grade.

Small step-up from GCSE – builds on knowledge & skills you already have.

In this pack you will find some suggested tasks for you to complete independently and which will help you progress onto the A Level successfully. Please bring any work that you complete to enrolment and we will give you feedback on how you have done.

Larger step-up from GCSE – builds new knowledge & skills.

When completing the tasks, the number of quills (see right) indicates the level of difficulty. Please also note, this pack is designed to be printed and so there may be issues with formatting if you try to type directly into the document.

Complex ideas & concepts.

If you'd like to get in touch before enrolment about these tasks, get some feedback or find out more about the course, please email Ruth Dunford at rdu@woking.ac.uk . Happy studying!

REPRESENTATION ...of superheroes

Use the outline provided to draw what you think a typical superhero looks like.

Give them a name.

List three ADJECTIVES* you would use to describe your superhero.

*An adjective is a word that describes a noun e.g. the RED apple or the dog is HUNGRY.

Superhero name: ....

List three adjectives to describe your superhero:

1.

2.

3.
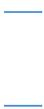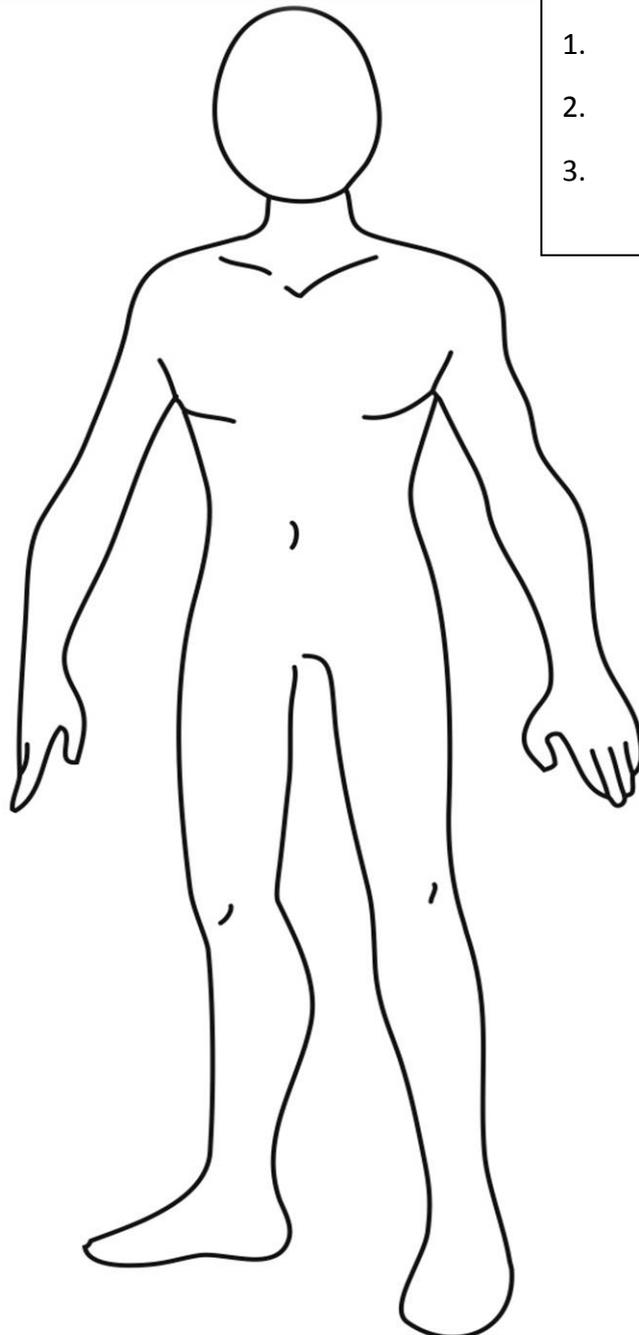
Research the meaning of 'representation' and 'stereotype' and then check your ideas against those below. Find three more examples of representations and three more examples of stereotypes relating to them.

Representations are words, pictures, sounds, sequences, stories, etc. that 'stand for' ideas, emotions, facts, etc. Some examples are:

intelligent person

beauty

family

Anyone can create a representation that reflects their 'idea' of something, just like your superheroes... **but they are not necessarily true and may reflect stereotypes (i.e. a widely held but fixed, oversimplified and often negative representation) rather than reality!**

- To be intelligent you don't have to wear glasses.

- Beauty doesn't mean being slim with long hair.

- Families do not always have a mother, father, two children and grandparents.

Task 3 ✒ ✒

Watch the following four clips and for each character write down at least three things to describe HOW the character is represented (write your ideas on the right-hand side of pages 5 and 6), e.g. Superman is shown to be strong and aggressive when defending innocent people.

Superman Flight Scene

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlINHSnUx9k

Superman Fight Scene

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkfUUqowQjA

Supergirl Flight Scene

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r56yFhT_lxY

Supergirl Fight Scene

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9GXEpgQwm0

Interesting fact – Did you know there are nine superman films but just one Supergirl film?

Task 4 ✒ ✒

Find examples of the listed language features (on the right-hand side of pages 5 and 6) in the descriptions of Superman and Supergirl (in the middle of pages 5 and 6).

Superman, also known as the Man of Steel, is one of the most powerful superheroes in the Universe and the most powerful being on planet Earth. He is faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. His abilities include incredible super-strength, super-speed, invulnerability, freezing breath, flight, and heat-vision. Using his immense solar-fuelled powers, he became Superman to defend mankind against all manner of threats while championing truth, justice and the American way!

How is Superman represented?

1..
....
2..
....
3..
....

Read the text and find the following:

Two metaphors

Positive and hyperbolic language:

a prefix
a superlative
a comparative

Verbs related to success

Nouns related to strength

A proper noun that suggests he is adult

Supergirl is cocky, hip, and overly independent, though she does protect Earth at Superman's request. Supergirl is not as powerful as Superman.   She is stealthy as a cat and sneaky as a spy in order to avoid as much direct confrontation and hand-to-hand combat as possible. She persuades people with her eloquence; she also wields a magic lasso that can ensnare others and force them to admit secrets. She can manifest sunstone crystals from her body however only while under great stress. She tries hard to make the world a better place but accepts she won't always be successful.

How is Supergirl represented?

1..
....
2..
....
3..
....

Read the text and find the following:

Two similes

Words with negative connotations

Words that are considered feminine (are they nouns or adjectives?)

Verbs related to communication

A quote or two that that suggest she is less powerful than Superman

A proper noun that suggests youth

Task 5

Now describe a superhero of your creation but ignore these stereotypical representations.

They must be different in some way as well as not conforming to gender stereotypes.

Try to include: a superlative or a comparative, a simile or metaphor, an unusual verb, an unusual noun, an unusual 'power', an unusual 'weapon'.

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Task 6 🖋 🖋 🖋

Read the following article on pages 10-17 (taken from https://docplayer.net/20829485-Fighting-like-a-girl-gendered-language-in-superhero-comics.html)

According to the study, summarise how the language of male and female superheroes is different.

Now watch a Marvel film (or two or more) of your choosing. Do the findings of the study apply to the film you have watched or does the film disprove the study's findings? If you watch more than one film, perhaps pick those which were produced further apart to see if there has been a change over time or those with protagonists of different genders to enable you to make a comparison.

1. Iron Man (2008)
2. The Incredible Hulk (2008)
3. Iron Man 2 (2010)
4. Thor (2011)
5. Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)
6. The Avengers (2012)
7. Iron Man 3 (2013)
8. Thor: The Dark World (2013)
9. Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)
10. Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)
11. Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)
12. Ant-Man (2015)
13. Captain America: Civil War (2016)
14. Doctor Strange (2016)
15. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (2017)
16. Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)
17. Thor: Ragnarok (2017)
18. Black Panther (2018)
19. Avengers: Infinity War (2018)
20. Ant-Man and the Wasp (2018)
21. Captain Marvel (2019)
22. Avengers: Endgame (2019)

Write at least one side summarising your findings. You should write in PEA paragraphs, use language terms and provide language evidence in the form of quotes from the film/s wherever possible.

Fighting like a girl: Gendered language in superhero comics

REBECCA DAVIS

Abstract

This study focused on gendered language in comic books, specifically looking to see if there is a difference between the way male and female superheroes speak. Given the generally sexist nature of comic books, a hypothesis was formulated that looked to explore whether female superheroes would speak differently from their male counterparts to reflect the sexism in their appearances and narratives. A second hypothesis suggesting that the general public would use sexist language to describe superheroes was also formulated, and tested via a four-question survey. A collection of 31 comics from two different superhero team titles was examined for gendered language, and was found to use little to no specifically gendered language for male or female superheroes. However, the second hypothesis found a trend in describing female superheroes for their looks rather than their powers or strengths.

1. Introduction

When Superman first flew onto comic book pages in the late 1930s, a new genre of comic was born. Since then, superheroes have slowly taken over the comic book market with the genre becoming the main revenue for comic book publishers everywhere (Beaty 2010). Though superhero comics are often viewed as a male-centric area, female readers have slowly begun to join the comic reading masses, finding the current comic book market more receptive to their presence than ever before.

While the genre is becoming more lenient to their female readers with more female based comic titles and inclusion into what is typically seen as a 'boys' hobby, the same is not true for their female characters. Since their earliest days female superheroes have been overly sexualised with revealing outfits, stood aside in favour of male superheroes, and turned into damsels rather than heroes more than once. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore whether the extreme gender disparity between male and female superheroes extends to the language they use, and whether that language adheres to the ideas of male and female speech put forward by scholars such as Lakoff (1973), Fishman (1977) and Goodwin (1980, cited in Cameron 1992).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Difference and Dominance

When it comes to the study of language and gender, investigations in the field can be seen to focus on two main view points: the difference approach and the dominance approach.

Johnson and Meinhof (1997) claim that "the tacit hypothesis of many studies seems to be that men and women are essentially different, and that this difference will be reflected in their contrasting use of language" (Johnson & Meinhof 1997: 11). Studies by researchers such as Fishman (1977) and Goodwin (1980, cited in Cameron 1992) both align to this hypothesis, finding males to be more competitive with their talk and females to be more cooperative. Lakoff (1973) proposed that women more commonly employed linguistic characteristics in their speech such as hedging, intensifiers and tag questions that men did not seem to share. Despite this, Johnson and Meinhof (1997) believe that focusing solely on these differences ignores the fact that both genders use the same linguistic repertoires and thus must have some degree of similarity to be able to communicate properly.

Lakoff (1973) was also one of the first to popularize the dominance approach to language and gender, claiming that women adopted linguistic features that put them in submissive roles compared to men. Cameron (1992) found that some researchers preferred to "stress the role of individual men in constraining women's linguistic behaviour so that it expresses subordinate status" (Cameron 1992: 15). Language trends such as using the word 'man' to refer to both males and females in conversation have been criticised as lacking true gender neutrality (Alexander 1999) and enforcing the dominance of male words and language over females. It could also be argued that the adoption of proper or refined language by women (Key 1975) also lends support to the dominance viewpoint, with women needing to adhere to certain linguistic codes to be seen as intelligent or as having higher   status   than   those   who   don't.

2.2 Sexism and Superheroes

While many studies on both the difference and dominance approaches in language and gender exist, studies that specifically look at any form of gendered language in superhero comics are largely non-existent. However, studies on sexism in comics and its various manifestations are growing in number. Brown (2011) wrote that "modern female characters are so thoroughly eroticized that it is near impossible to find a superheroine or villainess that is not defined primarily by her sex appeal" (Brown 2011: 77). O'Reilly (2005) found that the narrative device of a "hero on trial" was often used to rob female superheroes of their agency, while the same could not be found for their male counterparts. Wood (1989) put forth the idea that women in comics embody emotion, while men embody action, and women are usually either placed into the roles of the damsel in distress or the villain who needs to be put down gently. In general, both male and female superheroes in comics were found to personify hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles that represented the norms comic book readers expected to see (Murray 2011).

2.3 Aims of Study

Firstly, the ideas put forth by both the difference and dominance approach will be examined against the language used by superheroes in comic books. This report will attempt to examine whether gender norms expected by readers visually and in the narrative also extend to language used by superheroes of either gender. Secondly, this report will examine whether readers and non-readers of comic books use sexist or specifically gender-marked language when describing superheroes in a short questionnaire.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Data was collected from comic books published between 2012 and 2013. One title was taken from both Marvel and DC, the two biggest names in comic books and superhero characters, to avoid a biased view of superheroes from only one source. To ensure the interaction of both male and female superheroes, one team title were chosen from each company: DCs *Justice League* and Marvel's the *Avengers*. In addition, both comic titles were chosen because of their gender representation differences. Justice League features Wonder Woman, one of the best known female superheroes in popular culture. Given her role as the only female on the Justice League's roster, Wonder Woman stands as the only female representation in the team. In the Avengers, the team is usually more equally divided, featuring female superheroes such as the Black Widow, Spider-Woman and Captain Marvel. By looking at both comics, a clearer view of whether the number of females represented had an impact on the language they use. In total, 31 comics were analysed for this report, with 14 comics from the Justice League and 17 from the Avengers. All comics were chosen to begin and end on new story arcs and plots focused upon by their current writers. Each title was selected from DC and Marvel's recent reboots, namely DCs *New 52* and Marvel's *NOW*. As the focus of this report is restricted to only male and female superheroes, only scenes including and speeches given directly to or by superheroes were analysed.

Data for public descriptions of superheroes was taken from a four part survey distributed online to both comic book readers and non-comic book readers. Participants were asked to describe four different superheroes, with two from the Justice League and two from the Avengers. A total of 55 participants between the ages of 18 and 34 (M=30%; F=70%) completed the surveys.

3.2 Methods of Analysis

Data from the chosen comics were analysed by both their linguistic features and their content. Using Lakoff (1973) as a guide, three features were chosen to analyse the presence of female speech markers (see Table 1):

1. *Meaningless Particles*
   The use of particles such as 'Oh' at the beginnings of sentences, affirmative phrases such as 'Uh-huh' and 'Hmm' and also use of intensifiers such as 'So.'

2. *Empty Adjectives*
   Looking for 'women only' adjectives such as *adorable, charming, sweet, lovely,* and neutral adjectives such as *great, terrific, cool* and *neat*.

3. *Tag Questions*
   Whether tag questions such as *"It's beautiful, isn't it?"* appear in text for either gender of superhero.

Both genders of superheroes were analysed for these traits to examine whether women would have a higher frequency of these linguistic features, as proposed by Lakoff (1973). The content of the speech used was also analysed, specifically looking for (see Table 2):

1. *Aggressive Language*
   The spoken willingness to engage in violent acts, threats towards other superheroes or characters and attacking or starting verbal fights.

2. *Teasing, Joking and Humour*
   The use of jokes in speech, either as friendly or aggressive teasing, and general uses of humour.

3. *Expressions of Emotion*
   Looking for speech that starts with things like *"I hate"* or *"I love"*.

By looking at the situational contexts in which these traits were used, this study explored whether they influenced conversational or linguistic dominance in these situations, and whether dominance was detected more commonly in male or female superheroes.

Data from surveys were analysed based on their content looking specifically at mentions of typically female and male traits or expectations in comics, namely for female superheroes to be 'sexy' and male superheroes to be 'strong' (Murray 2011).

4. Results

4.1 Comic Data

	Justice League		Avengers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Linguistic features				
Meaningless particles	0	3	1	5
Empty adjectives	0	3	0	0
Tag questions	3	4	1	2
Total	3	10	2	7

Table 1 – Female speech markers

When looking at linguistic features and female speech markers, there was a clear difference between male and female superheroes. Especially in the *Justice League* comics, female superheroes employed more female speech markers in their interactions than their male counterparts. For the *Avengers*, females overall used fewer markers than in the *Justice League*, but still had more features than the males did. Nevertheless, in both comic titles males were more likely to use tag questions, almost matching their female counterparts in both comic titles.

In 14 and 17 issues of comics respectively, neither group of heroes seemed to exhibit definite preferences towards specific speech markings. In *Justice League*, most of the meaningless particles and empty adjectives came from a single character named Element Woman who was introduced in issue #17 and was mostly a background character. Wonder Woman was the sole user of tag questions, saying thing such as "People like us are really alone, aren't we?" and "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Similarly in the *Avengers*, Spider-Woman also used the tag question of "It's beautiful, isn't it?" in her speech. While the *Avengers* displayed no empty adjectives, the use of meaningless particles by both genders usually fell into the realm of speech like "Uh-huh" to begin sentences or to express interest in a sudden change of events.

	Justice League		Avengers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Content Features				
Aggressive language	6	6	3	1
Teasing/joking	7	0	6	1
Show of emotion	2	3	0	0
Total	15	9	9	2

Table 2 – Content features

For content features, *Justice League* once again showed a higher use of each feature but still at relatively low levels. Aggressive language was found to be even for both males and females in *Justice League*, though examples of female expressions of aggression were usually found to be triggered by emotion, while male expressions of aggression were usually used to attack another member of the team or a villain. For example, in issue #7 of *Justice League*, Wonder Woman expresses the urge to fight a villain after learning he was formerly an abusive spouse. However, in the same issue, the Green Lantern picks a fight with Batman over leadership and execution of the Justice League's mission, deliberately baiting Batman to return the aggression. In the *Avengers*, male aggression follows the same pattern, except for one example wherein Hyperion uses aggressive language towards a villain who steals creatures who are under the hero's protection. This aggression is more of a response to an emotional situation then to simply pick a fight, as is seen in the males of the *Justice League*.

Teasing and joking was dominated by male superheroes in both titles, with teasing generally used as an expression of friendship between heroes or a way to mock and annoy villains. In *Justice League*, Green Lantern also uses humour to aggravate other heroes (Batman). In the *Avengers,* Spider-man uses humour to make fun of a difficult situation or to show displeasure in certain contexts, and Iron Man uses jokes to make fun of past occurrences that had non-humorous results. *Justice League* also made more use of direct expressions of emotions, though these expressions sometimes still came across in a dominating and sexist light. Green Lantern in particular had a panel wherein he said "I hate being saved by Wonder Woman" and then is later teased by Aqua Man for the situation he

found himself in. Wonder Woman herself showed the most emotion, usually as worry or sadness over a former partner who was kidnapped and almost killed. In contrast, the *Avengers* seemed to avoid the same type of emotional expression, with neither gender displaying emotional content apart from aggression.

4.2 Survey results

Results for the survey varied, but five terms for each superhero were found to appear most frequently in both male and female participant's responses.

Superman	Wonder Woman	Iron Man	Black Widow
Fast	Beautiful/Sexy	Intelligent	Quick
Masculine	Strong	Arrogant	Clever
Strong	Scantily-Clad	Sexy	Sexy
Tall	Thin	Rich	Mysterious
Muscular	Smart	Womanizer	Stealthy

Table 3 – Superhero descriptions

In total, each superhero received an average of 16 descriptors from participants; the top five responses were collated and are shown in Table 3. Both male superheroes were more likely to be commented on for their appearance or mental prowess. Superman specifically gained descriptions about his undefeatable powers and his physique. In contrast, Iron Man was described by his arrogance, intelligence and money status, while also being marked as sexy or attractive. In their descriptions, participants were more likely to point out each male's strengths rather than their weaknesses. If any weaknesses were mentioned, they were mostly shaped by the males' female love interest.

Both female superheroes garnered more comments about their appearances and brain power than their brawn or muscles. Both were seen as smart and sexy, or, in the case of Black Widow, as stealthy and dangerous. While Wonder Woman was seen as strong, comments on her physique were restricted to her being thin or curvy. Unlike their male counterparts, both females were frequently described by their clothing which was also described as revealing and impractical. Overall, fewer participants seemed to be able to give the same in-depth comments for Wonder Woman and Black Widow as they did for Superman and Iron Man.

5. Discussion

Overall, results from the study showed a distinct lack of gender differences in the speech of male and female superheroes in terms of the linguistic and content features analysed. Neither male nor female superheroes tended to favour one type of speech over another, and neither seemed to have specific speech traits that set them apart. While some instances of

aggression from male superheroes seemed to support proposals put forward by Fishman (1997) and Goodwin (1980, cited in Cameron 1992), namely that males are more competitive with their speech, the lack of examples of this trait as well as contrasting examples of females being more cooperative leave the analysis of the data inconclusive. Most likely a more in-depth conversation analysis of this data would reveal clearer results. Despite proposals that certain linguistic features, such as tag questions, are more often utilised by females, male superheroes utilised these types of questions as much as female superheroes did, going against the ideas by Lakoff (1973) on women's speech. This lack of distinct features seems to lend support to Johnson and Meinhof's (1997) claims that men and women share a common language, and that perhaps this is the language coming across in superhero interactions.

The results of this report suggest that, while there are varying degrees of sexism evident in comics themselves, this sexism is not evident in the language each superhero uses. In *Justice League*, Wonder Woman is just as aggressive with her language as Batman or Green Lantern is, and yet she still wears a costume that was described in the surveys as impractical and overly sexualised. In *Avengers*, Spider-Woman utilises tag questions in her speech but does not use other female speech markers such as meaningless particles and empty adjectives. Despite the visual differences between male and female superheroes, and the differences in the challenges they face and the storylines in which they appear, their language use appears to be largely similar.

While these results do not suggest specific gendered or sexist language in comics, they do reiterate some arguments brought up in relation to superheroes and gender. Wonder Woman faces another trial as proposed by O'Reilly (2005), being forced by a villain to deal with the apparent death of a former lover to bring her down to a mortal level. Reporters on television, for example, usually refer to Wonder Woman by her attractiveness alone, thus defining her character by sex appeal, as suggested by Brown (2011). In *Avengers*, both Captain America and Iron Man are seen as men of action bringing the Avengers together to face a global threat. Other Avengers however, such as the female Captain Universe, are invariably portrayed in motherly, emotional roles, as suggested by Wood (1989), and still apparent in today's comics. Despite the language used in these situations being fairly neutral, the situations themselves cast ideals and gender differences that have been the subject of debate in comics for years.

The only great gender differences came from how people viewed superheroes. The surveys collected showed that readers and non-readers alike seem to typically assign superheroes hypermasculine and hyperfeminine traits, as proposed by Murray (2011). Even so, most participants directly commented on the sexism that led to their choices, and the impracticality of it in a modern world.

6. Conclusion

This report has shown that despite the visual sexism apparent in comics, not much can be seen in the way that superheroes of either gender talk or interact. The apparent lack of distinct gender differences in the voices of comic characters gives hope for the future of comic books to become more inclusive of all genders (though the current state of gender in the narratives does not). It could be argued that, if comic book writers are able to treat their

female characters fairly with their speech, one day they could also treat them fairly in their appearances and narratives as well.

The author of this paper would like to suggest that more studies on the language of comics be completed in the future to further investigate this topic. An exploration of visual mediums with a focus on language could highlight more key topics for the study of language and gender, and give more of an insight on comics and their impact on gender in the future.

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Task 7

As a final task, and unrelated to the representation of superheroes this time, go over all your notes from GCSE and this pack and compile a glossary of the language features and technical terms that you have learned.

You should put the list in alphabetical order, listing the language feature/technical term first followed by the definition and an example.

You can start by adding in 'Representation' and 'Stereotype'.